NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
21 MAY 1974

P- Perry, Jean

You've come a long way Katie Gibbs

org 1 Katherine Gibbs School

NOTE: (This office was queried on this subject by Jean Perry.)

By JEAN PERRY

"Sitting up straight? Having happy thoughts? Are we ready? B-e-e-gin!" At that command, 34 "Gibbs Girls" frantically began drumming their fingers in a typing test.

In an era of expanding job opportunities for women, the Katherine Gibbs School, one of the country's largest producers of executive secretaries, recognizes that clerical skills and personal attractiveness remain a woman's chief assets when she job hunts.

No matter that female caucuses are hauling corporations off to court in "affirmative action" suits on behalf of women facing job discrimination because of sex.

The Gibbs chain, Katie Gibbs as it's called by its graduates, continues to teach a program that has shown only minute change since the first school opened in 1911. There are six Gibbs schools along the East Coast.

While feminists seeking expanded opportunities for women take exception to their typing, filing, shorthand and personal grooming formula, the chain is thriving. Enrollment has increased from 1,900 three years ago to 2,500 today.

And their growth has meant profit. A spokeswoman for Macmillan, Inc., the publishers who acquired the chain from the Gibbs family in 1968, said the schools "had their best year (in 1973) making new revenues and profits."

At Gibbs the curriculum is, admittedly, planned by males.

"The designers of our programs are the employers," said the chain's executive vice president, Ms. Edith Gardener, at the New York school at 200 Park Ave. "We base everything on the needs of the men in industry who will be providing jobs for our graduates. The deciding factor in planning curriculum is industry's standards. After all, this is the thing that determines whether or not the girls get hired, and, consequently, whether or not we have a school."

School programs are for high school graduates, women who have some college credits, and college graduates.

Several feminists "occupied" the New York school in 1969 claiming that the Gibbs formula impedes a woman's on-the-job progress. By asking male executives for advice on the curriculum, the ad hoc group of feminists said that the school was allowing them to define the skills a woman could receive, and, therefore, the role she'd play on the job.

The demonstrators were ousted, but today the school has a "Management for Today's Woman" program. Courses include: Essentials of financial planning, office systems and procedures, and supervisory managerial techniques. If taken in a two-year sequence, they lead to a Gibbs Certificate.

The school also has a "New Woman Manager" seminar covering "case studies in decision making," and "trends in management approach to people and productivity."

But feminist Lee Walker, who formerly headed the National Organization for Women's (NOW) New York committee on office workers, said of the courses:

"I fear they are another version of sexist differentiation. Why have special for women courses. In large corporations, when they're looking for people to put into management slots, they search them out and place them in internal management training programs. Now suddenly we are sending women off to a girl's school.

"And they are paying for these courses themselves without guarantees that their companies are going to recognize Gibbs training."

So far, only three women have graduated from the two-year program.

According to Dean of Liberal Arts Mrs. Carol Eakle, who supervises the series, one graduate received a "lateral promotion," where she got money for essentially the same duties; another switched companies, moving to a "unique" position, and the third is "working" in California.

Eleven more women are expected to graduate this spring, and Mrs. Eakle says more time is needed before the course can be evaluated.

Gibbs officers grant that the decision to move a woman into management remains with the company involved. But they see the course as an "intermediate step" in preparing a woman's confidence so she'd make good managerial material should her company decide to make her a candidate for management training.

Feminist Margie Albert disagrees. She believes that women don't have such low self esteem that they need this intermediate step.

"The courses make it seem as though there are very real possibilities for women to enter management," says Ms. Albert, a former secretary who is now an organizer for District 65, Distributive Workers of America. "I can understand that they want to teach the basic skills, their typing, shorthand and filing formula. Jobs for stenographers, typists and secretaries are going begging. But for women interested in management, well, they should level with them. How many possibilities are there, really, for them to get in. Offering these courses is sort of selling a myth."

Of the 900-plus students at the New York school, the majority come to, as one brochure says, "learn to take rapid dictation and to produce those beautifully typed letters in impeccable English."

"I majored in art; you know, oil, landscapes, that sort of thing," said Katie Lawrence, 21, a graduate of St. Mary's College in Raleigh, N.C. "Most of my friends were going to teach, and I had no desire whatsoever to do that."

Gibbs student Mrs. Razia Aslam, 27, is a graduate of Punjab University in Pakistan. The Board of Education here would not recognize her four-year degree (two years in applied psychology plus two years of teacher training), so she has swapped teaching plans for a secretarial career. "I would not want to go to university all over again," Mrs. Aslam maintained.

Gibbs girls, as they are called, have come a long way from the white gloves, navy suit and hat image. They wear gobs of hair, cheeks, prints and plaids, and have sandaled feet.

Founder Gibbs probably would approve of their move along with the times image. Gibbs was no typing gofer. She was an alert business woman, a widow with two children, who noticed that women were moving into clerical jobs that had been held by men as the men went off to fight WW I. She was the first women to teach English and business math in addition to typing and shorthand. And she was one of the first to promote the idea that women could compose letters and otherwise work on their own. Gibbs [illegible] Gibbs Magazine, a Gibbs graduate, married her son, Gordon, and they ran the chain until Macmillan acquired it.